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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 001873

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [YM](#)
SUBJECT: THE SALEH SHOW: POLITICAL THEATER IN SANAA

REF: A. 2005 SANAA 1910
[1](#)B. SANAA 1743
[1](#)C. 2005 SANAA 2766

Classified By: DCM Nabeel Khoury for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. On June 24, President Saleh ended almost a year of speculation and announced his intention to run in September's Presidential election. Speaking before a peaceful mass rally in Sanaa, Saleh rescinded his July 2005 public pledge not to seek re-election, saying he was "responding to the will of the people." The announcement capped five days of ruling party antics and well-orchestrated public rallies in support of Saleh. Saleh's retraction had long been anticipated, however, causing many to view the recent events as nothing more than political theater. The real question remains, whether or not the opposition will field a serious candidate to challenge the President. End Summary.

"I'll Stay with You!": Saleh Accepts Nomination

[1](#)2. (U) Speaking before a crowd of supporters gathered on a parade ground in downtown Sanaa, Saleh retracted his July 2005 pledge not to seek a second term (ref A), saying "I comply with the people's pressure." Saleh expressed shock at the rally's size, which Yemeni Television estimated to be two million people who came "freely and spontaneously from all over the country." Saleh said his decision was a direct reflection of the "people's will" and came in response to the "tears of women, children and old people." Crowds had been gathering at the rally site since the early morning, calling on Saleh to "finish the journey" that he started and rule the country for seven more years.

Well-Organized Spontaneity

[1](#)3. (C) Emboffs observing the rally estimated that the crowd contained only 130,000 people and noted that only men were present. License plates on cars and buses transporting participants to the rally site indicated that most came from tribal areas outside of Sanaa, predominately from the presidential strongholds of Khowlan and Amran. The night before the "spontaneous" rally, Emboffs observed military vehicles scattered around the rally site, in addition to several Mercedes Benzes and Land Cruisers of the type typically belonging to well-connected government supporters and tribal sheikhs. By the morning of the rally, security forces were deployed in large numbers across the city and appeared well prepared to manage the traffic and the crowds

throughout the peaceful rally.

The Wait is Over...

¶4. (C) Saleh's announcement came after five days of a variety of public demonstrations. Since June 20, small crowds gathered daily in several major cities throughout the country, "demanding" that Saleh run again. Embassy contacts report that government officials conducted a door-to-door campaign through several neighborhoods to encourage children and disabled individuals to participate in the demonstrations. On June 21, the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) called an "emergency" convention to plead with Saleh to accept the party's presidential nomination. Saleh rebuffed their pleas, saying "I am not a taxi for hire...and will not be an umbrella for corruption."

¶5. (U) An organization of businesses supporting Saleh's re-election pledged to go on strike for one hour every day until he retracted his pledge. Tribes in the oil-rich Marib region east of Sanaa blocked off several roads, saying they would not allow fuel trucks through until Saleh agreed to run again. Around Sanaa, supporters also replaced posters from the ROYG's recently launched anti-corruption campaign with pro-Saleh campaign material. Opposition news outlets claimed that rallies organized to encourage Saleh not to run again were prevented by security forces.

But Why Were We Waiting at All?

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¶6. (C) Ever since Saleh's public announcement in July 2005 that he would not seek a second term, neither political insiders nor the general public believed that Saleh would step aside. Initial reactions to the retraction have focused on speculation regarding Saleh's motivations, with a variety of competing theories being supported. One ruling party official expressed his frustrations to Econoff, saying he could see no real purpose behind the President's "theatrics," given that everyone expected Saleh to run again. Other observers viewed Saleh's threat not to run as an effort to gain leverage over corrupt government officials or reformers, who are both placing increasing demands on his presidency. Many view the theatrics as an organized campaign by those who benefit most from Saleh's rule to protect their privileged positions. Still others consider it a poorly staged personal ploy by Saleh to win public support and admiration.

Comment: Inside Saleh's Mind

¶7. (C) It is clear that the events leading up to Saleh's long-anticipated retraction were well orchestrated by government officials and their supporters. What is unclear is what Saleh, or those around him, hoped to gain through such a patently stage-managed "public outcry." Although a dozen candidates have joined the presidential race so far, no one is capable of mounting a serious challenge to Saleh, who has effectively dismantled any real competition during his 28-year rule. Even the opposition coalition, which enjoys significant popular support, has not developed a serious plan to challenge Saleh and its component factors may not be able to agree on their own "consensus" candidate (ref B).

¶8. (C) Whatever Saleh's motivation, the President's acquiescence in his party's nomination is a resounding victory for the status quo. Considering the great uncertainty surrounding a post-Saleh Yemen (ref C), even the opposition may quietly breathe a sigh of relief at this announcement and put off a true contest for the presidency to 2013 or beyond. While Saleh's re-election is certain, the

September local council elections will produce truly competitive races. If those elections are free and fair, the 2006 elections could still prove a step forward in Yemen's democratic development.

Krajeski